

East. Big enough for the big boys of college athletics. Big enough to have something Big Brother in Lexington lacks: membership in what will be the best basketball conference going.

This is a league big enough to find on every map. Trips to Hattiesburg, Birmingham and Greenville are out. Philadelphia, Washington and the Big Apple are in.

It's big enough to find every March. As recently as 1994, Louisville was playing in the Metro Conference Tournament in the Mississippi Coast Coliseum in Biloxi. Now it has signed on to play its league tourney on the most famous hardwood in the world at Madison Square Garden.

It's big enough to keep a football coach happy. U of L lost the two best it ever had—Howard Schnellenberger and John L. Smith—because of conference affiliation. Today Petrino, a star-in-the-making, believes he has everything he needs to chase what had been unattainable: a national championship.

Schnellenberger, Denny Crum and Bill Olsen vaulted Louisville athletics forward dramatically in the 1980s and early '90s. That shouldn't be forgotten today when measuring how far the Cards have come. But by the time Jurich arrived, the school's isolationist athletic stance had outlived its usefulness.

As the conference landscape had begun to change, U of L hadn't changed with it. Hogging TV and postseason revenue and pipe-dreaming of football independent status wasn't helping make the Cards an attractive modern program. In fact, it nearly cost them membership in C-USA at a time when, as Jurich pointed out, "Louisville needed Conference USA much more than Conference USA needed Louisville."

Today Louisville is easily the most vibrant, viable and attractive school in the league. And in 2005 it will commence aiming even higher.

You want billboard material? You've got it. Louisville might not be the Best College Sports Town in America, but it's a better one today than it ever has been.

Before the official announcement yesterday, Klein stood at a podium in the U of L football complex, preparing to make introductions. Someone flipped a switch, and behind him a projection screen rolled up.

Behind the screen was the Big East banner that had been sitting on the table in his office earlier in the day. The symbolic wrinkles had been ironed out. And as the screen rolled up, Klein couldn't help but smile.

#### TRIBUTE TO MONA VANNATTER

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, I rise today to honor Mona Vannatter. On December 31, 2003, Mona will be retiring after 20 years of service at the Kentucky Rural Development State Office.

Raised in Anderson, IN, Mona graduated from Ball State University with an associate's degree. However, in 1978, she moved to the Bluegrass State with her husband, Steve, and their two daughters, Kristi and Sheri. Though a Hoosier by birth, Mona is a Wildcat at heart.

In 1983, Mona became the secretary to the State director of the Kentucky Rural Development State Office. Since that time, she has proven to be a dedicated and talented employee. Her colleagues praise her as a wonderful representative of the office who genuinely

cares about the Kentuckians with whom she interacts. In 2003, Mona was recognized for exemplary performance as secretary to the State director. For the past several years, she has also donated her time and energy to coordinating the United Way Combined Federal Campaign for the agency and successfully reaching the Rural Department goals.

Mona brings the same enthusiasm and energy to her life outside of work. An active member of Broadway Christian Church, Mona served as secretary for her Sunday school class and co-coordinator for God's Pantry. She taught a self-improvement class at the Women's Federal Prison Camp, bringing a positive influence and an optimistic outlook to those who need it most.

For two decades, she has been a dedicated employee of the Kentucky Rural Development State Office. Mona continually proves to be a positive influence in both her workplace and her community. I ask each of my colleagues to join me in thanking Mona Vannatter for all that she has done for her community, the commonwealth of Kentucky, and this great Nation.

#### HONORING OUR ARMED FORCES

Mr. GRASSLEY. Mr. President, I rise today in honor of a fellow Iowan and a great American, CWO4 Bruce A. Smith, who recently gave his life in service to his country as a pilot in Operation Iraqi Freedom. Chief Warrant Officer Smith was killed on November 2, 2003, after his helicopter was attacked by a surface-to-air missile 40 miles west of Baghdad in central Iraq. He is survived by his wife Oliva, his 15-year-old daughter Savannah, his 12-year-old son Nathan, his sisters Carol and Brenda, and his brother Brian, as well as numerous other family members, friends, and loved ones. Our deepest sympathies go out to the members of Chief Warrant Officer Smith's family and to all those who have been touched by his untimely passing.

Our Nation's strength resides in the hearts of the men and the women who serve in its defense. The liberties we prize and the freedoms we cherish would not exist if it were not for those who courageously risk their lives while serving in our Nation's Armed Forces. Although our history books are filled with the names of those great patriots whose actions defined our Nation's founding, and although we stand in awe of our fathers and our grandfathers for the heroism they displayed during the great wars of the 20th century, from time to time we are reminded that men and women of such stature can still be found defending our Nation and our way of life.

Today, we pay tribute to one such man, CWO4 Bruce A. Smith. Chief Warrant Officer Smith enlisted in the Iowa Army National Guard as a senior in high school, serving his Nation with distinction for more than 23 years, first

as a medic and then as a pilot, before losing his life in Iraq. Chief Warrant Officer Smith's exemplary career in the National Guard, his commitment to his family, and his sense of duty attest to his character as an outstanding American.

As I stand before you today to honor a fallen patriot, I would also like to use this opportunity to extend my deepest sympathies to Chief Warrant Officer Smith's loved ones. While we share their grief, we cannot possibly fully understand their sense of loss. We owe them a debt that can never be repaid and I know they will be in the thoughts and prayers of many Americans.

CWO4 Bruce A. Smith has entered the ranks of our Nation's great patriots, and his courage, his dedication to duty, and his sacrifice are all testaments to his status as a true American hero. Let us always remember Chief Warrant Officer Smith's service to our Nation.

I also speak today in honor of a fellow Iowan and a great American, SGT Paul F. "Ringo" Fisher, who recently gave his life in service to his country as part of Operation Iraqi Freedom. On November 2, 2003, the helicopter in which Sergeant Fisher was riding was forced to make a crash landing about 40 miles west of Baghdad after being struck by a shoulder-fired missile. Sergeant Fisher sustained multiple injuries in the crash, which ultimately led to his death 4 days later on November 6, 2003, at the Homburg University Klinikum in Homburg, Germany. Sergeant Fisher is survived by his wife Karen, his stepson Jason, his mother Mary, his sister Brenda, and his brother David, as well as numerous other family members, friends, and loved ones.

I ask my colleagues in the Senate and my fellow citizens across our great Nation to join me today in paying tribute to Sergeant Fisher for his bravery, for his dedication to the cause of freedom, and for his sacrifice in defense of the liberties we all so dearly prize. The selflessness of a soldier is unmatched in the history of human endeavors, and mankind knows no greater act of courage than that displayed by the individual upon sacrificing his life for his countrymen, their liberty, and their way of life.

Although we honor Sergeant Fisher as a fallen patriot, we must also pay special tribute to his loved ones whose grief we share, but whose sense of loss we cannot possibly fully understand. My deepest sympathy goes out to the members of Sergeant Fisher's family, to his friends, and to all those who have been touched by his untimely passing. Although there is nothing I can offer that will ever compensate for their loss, I hope they will find some comfort in the thoughts and prayers of a grateful Nation who will be forever in their debt.

Our national history is filled with ordinary men and women who sacrificed their lives in service to our country.